CHILDREN'S BOOKS: TRANSLATION AND ADAPTATION

— VARSHA DAS*

The world is becoming smaller day by day. Columbus nearly got lost in search of India and discovered America instead, facing all kinds of odds at sea. But today, we have reached Antarctica, landed on the moon, established laboratories in space and sent satellites to relay programmes of one country to the rest of the world. Strange is not so strange and unfamiliar is not so unfamiliar any more.

Man's curiosity, his thirst for knowledge, his questioning and seeking mind knows no limit. He finds the courage to venture into the realm of the unknown. His eyes see more than what actually happens on the surface. His inquisitive nature goes beyond certain physical phenomena. Most of these pursuits are to enrich his own life with the knowledge and experience of others to develop a better understanding of others, to widen the horizon by getting acquainted with the lives of others, thereby making our own lives better and happier.

The best way to achieve this goal is to actually live in different places and absorb the culture and ethos of other races. But this has its own limitations. It is physically impossible to travel all over the country or all over the world, in one lifetime. A practical approach, therefore, is to acquire in-

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formation and knowledge through the oral and written word, and through electronic audio-visual media which is comparatively new. It is quite effective and far-reaching and has been internationalized. In a country like India, all forms, oral, written and electronic, co-exist.

India is a multi-lingual and multi-cultural country. At times, communication becomes impossible even with the people of a neighbouring state, because their language is different. In cosmopolitan cities like Bombay and Delhi, we sometimes cannot communicate with our own neighbours except through a link language like Hindi or English. In families where there are mixed marriages, where the parents belong to two different linguistic groups, their children either pick up both the languages or they all speak in the third language, the language of that region, or in English!

In my own house, when my daughter was hardly three years old, she became conscious of the fact that her parents spoke two different languages. She spoke to her father in Oriya and in Gujarati to me. At times, she would split even a single sentence into two different languages if a part of it was addressed to the other parent!

Once we went to Orissa. My daughter recited a nursery rhyme in Hindi to her uncles and aunts. They could not follow it because it was in Hindi. She quickly translated each and every line into Oriya! The rhyme told the story of a sparrow and its four chicks. As soon as their wings grew stronger, they flew out of their nest, went in different directions all over the world and eventually returned to their own nest, finding it by far the cosiest and sweetest place!

The point I wish to make is that a universal theme of this kind can be translated or adapted in any language of the world. It does not emphasise a particular culture. It contains an emotion which is valid for all sentient beings like birds, animals and human beings. But what happens when it is in the language of a country that has no sparrow? The translator, in such cases, would use her discretion and change it to a bird commonly found there, because the rhyme is not so much about a sparrow as about the idea that 'home' is an abode of love and warmth, and therefore, the best place in the world. This promotes the child to look for these qualities in her own home and to feel secure.

In an adaptation of this nature, an external experience is re-experienced internally. Internalised experience forms a value which is precious for self-development.

Let us take another example. There is the story of an elephant published by the National Book Trust, India, called *Rupa, the Elephant*. This elephant is in the zoo. It gets bored with its own grey colour and desires to have colourful patches and stripes all over. Various birds and animals lend their colours to the elephant but the children get scared of it and refuse to ride on it. This saddens the elephant. It weeps, and then jumps into a pool and washes off all the colours. The children are happy to get back their old friend. The elephant is also happy to have them on its back.

This is again a sweet little story of universal emotions, depicting affectionate bonds between human beings and animals.

The countries in which elephants are not used for a joy-ride can take up any other animal and narrate the same story through an adaptation. But a country like the Republic of Maldives, where there are neither elephants nor any other animals except a few cats, it is just not possible to make a local adaptation. This story, therefore, can be translated into Divehi, the local language of the Maldives, as an Indian story, depicting Indian flora and fauna. Its realistic setting would not change. The elephant to Maldivian children might seem a character

from fantasy! But the feelings expressed by the children of the story, and the tears in the eyes of the elephant when they refused to sit on it, are all so human and universal that in spite of a strange central figure, the story would be enjoyed in its translation.

The cultural aspect of the original story, thus, remains unchanged and gets transferred when it is translated into another language. It retains its alien character. But this is often necessary to arouse curiosity in a child's mind about unfamiliar living beings and names. It helps the process of psychological and intellectual growth.

It is not at all that easy to select a work that can be translated or adapted. One may like a story as an adult reader, but the theme, concept, its presentation etc. may be totally unsuitable for translation. Even if one of these is not suitable for the target readership, it is better to drop the idea of translation.

The genre of poetry is supposed to be the most difficult to translate. Some people have attempted adaptations of nursery rhymes like Jack and Jill, but I personally feel that there is no need to translate or adapt rhymes with a foreign cultural element. India's oral literature is so rich in quality and quantity that it is just not necessary to borrow from the West. Why should one feel so impoverished or inferior when our own heritage is so rich?

The issue of nursery rhymes should not be confused with thematic poems for children. Translation of poems for children becomes effective when it creates rhythm and rhyme in the language of translation.

Nonsense rhymes simply cannot be translated. Native flavour is the most important element in such rhymes.

On the other hand, there are classics which cannot be adapted. Attempts have been made in India to bring out local stories in the mould of some Western classics However, such attempts have rarely been successful. It is a pity that Indian translators ignore Indian classics. They can be better translated or adapted from one Indian language to another, because, in spite of India's cultural diversity, there is an undercurrent of affinity. Sensibility and sensitivity remain the same. Alien cultural elements found in Western books would obviously be absent in Indian works. Translations and adaptations from one Indian language to another would eventually enrich Indian literature for children.

We often come across foreign general knowledge books translated into Indian languages. This can be acceptable to the extent to which they deal with universal phenomena like scientific principles, pure information etc. But when it comes to introducing birds, animals, flowers and so on, we find that some of these species are not familiar to our children, and some significant native species are missing. General knowledge books cannot be adapted. They can only be translated, but the selection of the book is very important.

The most vital and decisive factor to be considered in taking up any work for translation or adaptation is our child, who is going to read the translated or adapted version. We have to ask ourselves a few questions before we start rendering it into another language:

1. Which child would be interested in this book? Urban? Rural? Or both? Educated or semi-educated?
2. Is the theme familiar or unfamiliar?
3. Is the concept intelligible or abstract?
4. Is the setting known or unknown?
5. Would the child be able to identify himself/herself with the characters of the story?
6. Would it help the child to develop any of his/her faculties?
7. Would it increase his/her curiosity, spirit of inquiry or imagination?

8. Does it have universal appeal or does it relate to a specific region or culture?
9. Would it widen his/her horizons, even if it is on an unfamiliar footing?

Answers to all these questions would enable the translator to take the following decisions: Firstly, whether the book in question should be rendered into another language or not, and secondly, whether it should be translated or adapted.

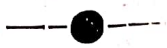
It is said that "Translation is a great misunderstanding." There is a possibility of such misunderstanding because intercultural communication is difficult to establish. It becomes all the more difficult when countries like Japan, with a homogeneous culture come into contact with India or Pakistan, with pluralistic cultures. The translator, in such cases, requires a good knowledge of both the cultures, i.e., the culture of the country from where the original story is taken and also the culture of the country for which it would eventually be translated. For example, while describing summer in the desert area of Rajasthan, one can visualise parched land and dying animals. But summer in a cold country is most welcome. People look jubilant at the onset of it. A single word like 'hot' or 'heat' can have so many different meanings in the cultural and textual context.

How much liberty a translator can take with the original text, is another important issue. At times, the target language itself is such that it requires expansion for the sake of lucidity. For example, "French or Spanish constructions can often be exactly matched in English. German generally needs recasting. Latin, Sanskrit and Russian require varying degrtes of expansion." *(Encyclopaedia American, Vol. 27 page 12, 1965 Ed.)*

The chances of 'misunderstanding', therefore, cannot be ruled out. One may be tempted to conclude that it is easier to write an original story than to translate! Both disciplines have their own norms and skills. A creative translator with a sense of discretion, can re-create the original in the translated or adapted version in such a way that it may read even better than the original. Translators are basically cultural ambassadors.

Goethe had said more than two hundred years ago that 'translators are to be regarded as bustling go-betweens who recommend a half-veiled beauty to us as an extremely pleasing one: they arouse an irresistible desire for the original.'

Transfer of cultural aspect is the real crux of trnslation activity. How much of it can be transferred? And in what manner? Understanding of this would prompt the translator to decide whether the work should be translated or adapted. The onus is, therefore, on the translator, and the translator alone.



A gifted writer, illustrator or translator needs recognition and he must get it.